

God Never Gives Up
Matthew 21:33-46
Isaiah 53:1-5

This morning's gospel text is normally one I would avoid. I would likely choose one of the other texts or go outside the lectionary altogether. But while I was in the pool the other night, I often do my best thinking in the pool, it came to me that I indeed wanted to use the gospel text this morning and that I wanted to talk about how God never gives up on us no matter how badly we are behaving.

It seems to me that there are four basic ways that we can approach God. The first is to deny God's existence, or worse yet not give the concept of faith even a passing thought. At least with denying God, there is some thought about the decision. But so many people either take some sense of faith for granted or they don't think about it at all, except in an occasional passing thought. Weekends are now full of all sorts of things that have to be done -- sporting events, flea markets, shopping, sleeping in— for after all God said Sundays were supposed to be a day of rest.

Then there is the opposite approach to faith. This is the group of faithful folks who seek to practice their faith not only on Sundays but in how they live their lives. These are thoughtful people whose lives have been profoundly touched by God and their belief that Jesus is their Lord and Savior is pivotal to their very being; because of this they want to follow Jesus' example as closely as possible so that a broken world can be healed whenever possible. They know that they will not always get it right, but still they struggle with what it means to be a person of faith.

Then there are two groups I'd place in the middle. The people

who when things aren't going their way, complain and whine to God that things aren't fair or that God has just abandoned them. For the past several weeks our OT lessons have been about Moses' having to deal with an ungrateful, whining group of people in the wilderness. Even when God has continued to meet their needs, they complain and blame Moses and God for taking them out of the bondage they lived in in Egypt.

This is a group that always sees the worst in things, and believes only when things are going well. They are so nearsighted that they lose track of other possibilities. The fundamental trust in God that is the basis of faith allude them. They do not want to correct their vision because they don't realize they are missing anything important.

Then there are the people who think they are faithful to God but who are close minded about God's presence in the world.

Sometimes things seem to be going well, there is relative peace and prosperity, most of these people are going to church regularly, the priests and other religious authorities are content, and the people are happy. At such times they want no reminder that their blessings may be from God or that they are wandering away from God's desires and grace.

Throughout the Bible we see over and over again, the people ignoring the will of God, and the people sent to convey God's will.

A great number of the OT books are devoted to the prophets. These are the Lord's ambassadors to the people who both bring the message of repentance and sometimes they speak of God's continuing presence and hope even in the midst of hardship and exile.

Our passage from Isaiah today is one of four passages that are referred to as the suffering servant songs. These are passages that get harsher and harsher with each succeeding song. The prophet is assailed and vilified by the people and the leaders

because the prophet brings words they do not want to hear and presents issues that the people only want to ignore. Some have said that the servant is a reference to Jesus, but that is the subject of much debate. This situation of turning from God because things are so comfortable is the one I want to examine today.

Our gospel lesson is fundamentally one of ungratefulness, rejection, and the worker's need to keep the vineyard for themselves no matter what it takes. The owner of the vineyard has built up a thriving area through much hard work and financial input. The owner is fair to the workers and has sought to protect both the vineyard and the workers. The owner leaves the vineyard in the control of what he assumes are faithful servants and goes off. The landowner has leased the vineyard to the workers thereby giving them some ownership in the productivity of it. All seems well; everyone should be happy with the arrangement. Instead the workers become complacent and greedy. Slowly their attitude toward the land and the owner change. They think that since they are doing all the work, the vineyard should be theirs because after all, what input and help is the owner taking? At harvest time the owner sends representatives to the vineyard to get his share of the produce and profits. The owner does not seek more than his due, but the tenants do not want to even give up that much even though their share would be more than enough and certainly more than they had any right to expect. But as so often happens the tenants wanted more - more money, more prestige, more control, and these were important no matter what the cost to the rightful owner.

Each time the owner sent representatives, they were beaten and killed. They came in peace, expecting to be received with respect; instead their authority was rejected, and they were abused. We don't know the owner's reaction to this except he did not send armed guards to take back what was his and he

sent his son, his heir to peacefully try to set right what was broken. The son too was killed.

The parable ends with Jesus asking the religious leaders what do they think the owner did then. Of course they answered that the owner lashed out in anger and killed all those who had taken so much of what was his. Jesus though disputed this answer and actually accused those same leaders of being like the unfaithful tenants. Needless to say, this did not go over well with the leaders.

In the OT the vine or vineyard is often used as a metaphor for God's people. The vineyard figures frequently in Jesus' parables. Here is where God's love produced incredible work and beauty can be seen and enjoyed. But all too often God's people do not appreciate what they have, what has been given to them not by anything they have done but because of God's ongoing love.

If the vineyard refers to Israel, then the tenant farmers represent Israel's religious leaders, who despite their professed loyalty to Israel's law (Torah), refuse to give God his due by acknowledging and accepting his mighty presence in the life and mission of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

When successive "prophets" are sent to the "tenants" – and then killed – the leaders heard Jesus remind them of the habit all of Israel had of ignoring many of the warnings the prophets had previously announced. The religious leaders were being criticized for ignoring their own God sent messengers.

Matthew weaves this parable into a rich account of salvation history. The vineyard represents the people and the landowner is God. God's representatives that are sent to collect the produce are the prophets sent to Israel. Now the heir of the owner has

come to make a final try at getting the tenants to understand the depth and strength of the love of God. The son whom the tenants throw out of the vineyard and kill is Jesus. The owner, in sending his son, hoped that at least the elders and the people will listen to him; instead the opposite happens, God's son is killed because he threatens not only the status quo, but because Jesus in essence accuses the religious leaders of taking credit for things that is not their doing.

In this parable we see God's love and enduring devotion, even when the Lord is being rejected and persecuted. Even then God does not give up, God does not destroy all the tenants and give the land to others who would treat it responsibly and accept the grace and trust of the Lord.

The Lord works with all people no matter who they are or what they have done; no one is given up on and what an incredible message that is. God has not only given us grace and unending love, but God has given us creation, the vineyard, to take care of. We are to care for the natural order of creation, but also for all that it produces, and most notably, we are to try and help all people to respond faithfully to God.
